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African Planners, Statisticians and
Demographers

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EVALUATION OF THE JOINT CONFERENCE OF AFRICAN PLANNERS, STATISTICIANS AND DEMOGRAPHERS

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Introduction

1. The Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers is a relatively new ECA body, created by merging previously separate conferences in the three fields concerned. Its main objectives are to promote collaborative action at both national and regional levels and to provide a forum for technical examination of the main aspects of African development. The first two sessions of the joint conference were held in 1980 and 1982.

2. After the second session it was decided to evaluate the progress and performance of the joint conference in terms of attendance and the opinions of participants. The results are presented in the next two sections of this report and supporting data are given in five tables in the annex.

3. The last section of the report describes the conclusions of the secretariat and the resulting modification of arrangements in preparing for the third session of the joint conference.

Attendance at the first two sessions

4. Tables 1 and 2 in the annex summarise participation in the 1980 and 1982 sessions of the joint conference. While the figures are not startling, they do draw attention to a few points of interest and concern.

5. In the first session 34 African governments were represented. At the second session in 1982 only 26 African governments participated and this is a cause for concern. It may partly reflect shortage of travel funds but the few North African participants and the sharp decline in those from East Africa is notable.

6. The statisticians were the most strongly represented group at the 1980 session but the attendance of planners and demographers was proportionately higher in 1982, which suggests an attempt to achieve better balance. The number of embassy and other non-technical representatives also fell significantly, presumably in response to the plea by ECA. However the overall number of country participants fell from 94 to 70, reflecting the generally lower level of representation already noted.

7. There were 21 heads of planning and statistical services at both the 1980 and 1982 sessions, with a slightly improved proportion of planning heads at the latter. Not much can be said about the demographers in this respect because they are generally attached to national statistical services and, except in the case of census offices, do not have directors regarded as heads of services. However, in a few cases, the director of the national statistical office may himself be a demographer.

8. The participation of non-African countries remained at 7 - 8 in both meetings. There was fairly strong support by UN departments and agencies and the reduced number represented in 1982 results only from the withdrawal of some units not relevant to the conference. Attendance of inter-governmental organizations was fairly good.

Evaluation of the second session

9. An evaluation questionnaire was sent to all people who participated in the 1982 session of the conference. It resulted in a 67 per cent response, with a slightly higher proportion of replies from observers than from delegates. Details are given in Table 3.

10. A broad summary of the answers to individual questions is presented in Table 4. The questions were posed on the basis of good/fair/poor and yes/no assessments and the results have been expressed as percentage distributions of replies. In looking at these figures three constraints have to be taken into account: (1) the opinions of the 23 per cent of participants who did not reply are unknown (2) there is a tendency in answering this kind of questionnaire to be over-polite and (3) no weights have been applied in the total columns of Table 4 to deal with the differing response rates of delegates and observers, but this does not significantly affect conclusions.

11. Perhaps the main consideration to emerge from the evaluation was the observers' opinion of attendance by African countries. 28 per cent said it was poor and no other question in the survey elicited such a negative response; only 22 per cent of the observers thought that the attendance of national officials was good. The opinion of delegates themselves about their own attendance was little better and only 36 per cent described the position as good.

12. Feelings regarding the participation of other groups were fairly consistent on the part of delegates and observers. People would clearly have been happier if a few more non-African countries had participated, but the attendance of UN agencies, inter-governmental organizations and training and research centres was considered satisfactory.

13. 59 per cent of the observers, but only 36 per cent of the delegates, reported that documents had been received in good time before the meeting. As documents were despatched in batches at the same time to both groups, the difference probably reflects faster postal services to destinations outside the region. Much the same position is shown in the answers to the question on whether there was enough time to read the documents beforehand. There was a strong general feeling, at the 85 per cent level, that African countries should have a more active role in preparing conference documentation.

14. Administrative arrangements for the conference, i.e. meeting rooms hotels and local transportation, appear to have been considered satisfactory but were rated poorer by the delegates than by the observers. 17 per cent of the delegates described hotels as poor but this is probably related to their own choice of accommodation.

15. Opinions on the quality of conference documents were consistent and fairly low. Only 45 per cent of participants said the documents were good and another 45 per cent rated them as fair. There were no questions on the means of improving conference documentation, which might have provided useful supplementary information.

16. Both delegates and observers held much the same and quite strong views on the conference agenda. 74 per cent believed that it attempted to cover too many topics and 82 per cent said that there should be a more selective approach in choosing agenda items. In a related question on the amount of time which should be devoted to plenary discussions, 62 per cent of delegates and 72 per cent of observers put their answers in the lowest box provided, which was 50 per cent of total conference time. This was a fault in the questionnaire design because clearly some would prefer a much shorter time in plenary.

17. On the quality of debates, the work of conference officers received fairly high rating. 59 per cent of participants thought the performance of plenary officers to be good and 64 per cent gave the same rating to committee officers. Only 43 per cent of the delegates thought that their own contribution to the debates was good but the observers had a higher opinion of the delegates at 52 per cent. The contribution of observers was rated good by a fairly consistent percentage of only 45 among all participants.

18. Assessment of the secretariat's performance in the debates varied more widely. 58 per cent of delegates and 74 per cent of observers considered the presentation of agenda items to be good but the secretariat's ability to answer questions raised in the discussions received a much lower rating. Only 38 per cent of delegates and 54 per cent of observers thought that good answers had been given.

19. Participants were asked to assess the prospects of the conference in achieving its basic aim of integrated activity in planning, statistics and demography. Only 48 per cent of delegates and 35 per cent of observers thought the prospects to be good and about 11 per cent overall rated the chances as poor.

20. Regarding informal contacts during the period of the conference, 57 per cent of the delegates and 85 per cent of the observers indicated that they had good opportunity for private discussions. The response of the observers to some extent contradicts their complaint about the attendance of African countries.

21. It should be noted that the above interpretation and the data in table 4 do not distinguish between the responses of planners, statisticians and demographers. In table 5 the replies of these three groups are given for a few selected questions in respect of delegates only. There are differences but, at this level of disaggregation, the numbers of respondents are rather small for definite conclusions. Perhaps there is a hint of additional support for the idea that planners are hoping that the conference can be used as a means of improving the relationship between the groups of people concerned with the production and application of data.

Conclusions and action taken

22. In making preparations for the third session of the joint conference, the secretariat took into account the results of the evaluation described above and also a request of the 1982 meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers, in resolution 438(XVII), that information and computer specialists should be included as a fourth group within the conference. The main conclusions and action taken are described briefly below.

Attendance

23. The reduced participation of African countries in the second session of the conference was not considered to be an adverse indication of performance. Economic conditions in 1982 were poor and there was difficulty in finding travel funds. Observers had expressed disappointment at the low African participation in the second session, but it was felt that they would probably not reduce their own future attendance on account of this alone.

24. An additional consideration was the slightly improved proportions of planners and demographers at the second session. The change with respect to demographers was explained by poor attendance at the first session, which was held shortly after a meeting of the Conference of African Demographers. In the case of planners, it was believed that there is a real increase of interest in the conference as a co-ordinating instrument and planners are likely to become the predominant group because planning ministries in many countries incorporate statistics and demography.

25. It was decided that contact should be made with all groups of participants well in advance of the formal invitations to enable them to make the necessary budgetary provision.

Documentation

26. To improve the quality of conference documents, a much stricter review procedure was established by the substantive divisions concerned. Except for reports of meetings, it was decided that no paper should exceed 25 pages and that the deadline for the preparation of all drafts should be 30 June 1983 to facilitate this thorough review. In addition, an effort was made to achieve a more integrated approach in preparing the whole body of documentation. The suggestion that countries should be invited to prepare some of the papers was borne in mind when drawing up the list of documents, but was found to be impracticable because of the time constraint.

Debates

27. In order to ensure a concise and clear presentation of agenda items, the secretariat staff responsible have been requested to prepare written statements highlighting the main points for discussion. In answering questions and summarizing conclusions, chiefs of divisions or other suitable persons will assist discussion leaders where necessary.

28. As the quality of debates is also dependent on conference chairmen, it was decided that there should be a meeting of heads of delegations before the opening of the third session of the joint conference for the provisional selection of officers and that they should be given a short preliminary briefing.

Agenda

29. In the light of the view expressed by participants that plenary meetings should occupy only about half the total discussion time available, the agenda was arranged with about eight half-days of plenary meetings and seven for committee meetings.

General

30. It was concluded that, provided the more detailed improvements noted above are made, arrangements for the joint conference are generally satisfactory and no radical changes are needed at the present time. Although it was disappointing that the second session was not significantly better than the first, the overall usefulness and performance of the conference can be determined only after one or two more sessions have been held.

Attendance of African governments at the first two sessions of the Joint Conference

Table 1

Sub region	Total countries	Countries attending		Country participants										Heads of services present			
				Planners		Statis.		Demogs.		Others		Total		Planners		Statis.	
		1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982
North	6	4	2	4	2	4	2	-	2	2	1	10	7	-	-	-	1
West	16	12	12	8	8	13	7	3	4	3	1	27	20	2	3	6	5
Central	11	7	6	11	8	3	6	2	4	6	-	22	18	3	4	3	6
East	17	11	6	8	10	17	10	4	3	6	2	35	25	-	-	7	2
Total	50[1/]	34	26	31	28	37	25	9	13	17	4	94	70	5	7	16	14

1/ Excludes Namibia, Reunior and Western Sahara

Attendance of observers at the first two sessionf of the Joint Conference

Table 2

Kind of representation	Units attending		Planners		Statis.		Demogs.		Others		Total	
	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982	1980	1982
Non-African countries	7	8	3	2	5	7	2	1	5	4	15	14
UN departments and agencies	14	11	6	2	6	13	2	1	4	8	18	24
Inter-governmental organisations	10	11	3	2	6	7	3	1	2	3	14	13
Training centres, etc.	11[1/]	9	2	-	9	7	2	3	-	-	13[1/]	10
Total	42	39	14	6	26	34	9	6	11	15	60	61

1/ Includes the group of senior consultants

Response to the evaluation questionnaire on the second session of the Joint Conference

Table 3

	Planners			Statisticians			Demographers			Others			Total		
	A*	R*	% response	A	R	% response	A	R	% response	A	R	% response	A	R	% response
Delegates	28	17	61	26	20	77	12	7	58	4	0	-	70	44	63
Observers	6	4	67	34	23	68	6	6	100	15	11	73	61	44	72
Total	34	21	62	60	43	72	18	13	72	19	11	58	131	88	67

A* Attendance

R* Replies

Table 4

Evaluation questionnaire (summary responses)

		In percentages Delegates				In percentages Observers				In percentages Total			
		Good	Fair	Poor	Not spec.	Good	Fair	poor	Not spec.	Good	Fair	Poor	Not spec.
I.	Adequacy of attendance												
	1. African countries	36	55	9	-	22	43	28	7	28	49	19	4
	2. Non-African countries	43	35	17	5	48	39	9	4	45	36	14	5
	3. UN agencies	79	19	2	-	78	13	2	7	79	16	2	3
	4. Inter-governmental bodies	64	33	-	3	65	22	9	4	65	27	5	3
	5. Training and research centres	62	29	9	-	59	35	2	4	60	32	6	2
II.	Documentation	Yes	No			Yes	No			Yes	No		
	1. Documents received in time	36	62		2	59	39		2	48	50		2
	2. Enough time for reading	17	83		-	50	46		4	34	64		2
	3. Need for more active country role in preparing documents	86	14		-	85	15		-	85	15		-
III.	Administrative arrangements	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s
	1. Meeting rooms	53	38	7	2	70	26	2	2	63	30	5	2
	2. Hotels	45	5	17	33	61	7	4	28	53	6	10	31
	3. Local transportation	40	21	5	33	52	17	7	24	47	19	6	28
	4. Other (specify)	4	3	26	67	7	2	2	89	6	2	14	78
IV.	Quality of the Conference documents	48	43	2	7	43	46	2	9	45	45	2	8
V.	Agenda	Yes	No			Yes	No			Yes	No		
	1. Did it cover too many topics	76	22		2	72	28		-	74	25		1
	2. Need for more selective approach	81	17		2	83	17		-	82	17		1
	3. Proportion of time to be spent in plenary	50%	65%		80%	50%	65%		80%	50%	65%		80%
		62	36		2	72	26		2	67	31		2

Table 4 (continued)

Evaluation questionnaire (summary responses)	In percentages Delegates				In percentages Observers				In percentages Total			
	Good	Fair	Poor	Not spec.	Good	Fair	Poor	Not spec.	Good	Fair	Poor	Not spec.
VI. Quality of debates												
1. Work of the conference officers:												
Plenary	57	38	5	-	61	28	11	-	59	33	77	1
Committee	62	31	7	-	67	28	2	3	64	30	5	1
2. Contribution of: Delegates	43	50	7	-	52	41	7	-	48	45	7	-
Observers	43	45	12	-	46	45	7	2	45	45	9	1
3. Secretariat's effectiveness in:												
Presenting agenda items	58	40	2	-	74	26	-	-	66	33	1	-
Answering questions raised	38	60	2	-	54	35	7	4	46	46	5	3
VII. Conference's prospects for achieving integration	48	38	12	2	35	50	11	4	41	44	11	4
VIII. Opportunity for informal contacts	57	26	17	-	85	9	2	4	72	17	9	2

Table 5 - Responses of planning, statistics and demography delegates to some selected questions

	Planners				Statisticians				Demographers			
	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s	Good	Fair	Poor	N/s
Adequacy of attendance: African countries	29	53	18	-	44	50	6	-	29	71	-	-
Quality of conference documents	53	47	-	-	44	33	6	17	43	57	-	-
Work of conference officers: Plenary	59	41	-	-	50	39	11	-	71	29	-	-
Committee	59	29	12	-	56	39	5	-	86	14	-	-
Conference's prospects for achieving integration	59	29	6	6	44	33	22	-	29	71	-	-